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HINTS ON THE CARE OF OPOSSUMS ^{1/}

Prepared in the Section of Fur Resources, Division of Wildlife Research

The opossum has long been a favorite game animal in the Southern States and figures largely in the songs and folklore of the negroes. Its value as a fur animal, however, has only recently been recognized. With its well-established value as food, this recently appreciated usefulness makes the animal worthy of protection. It is very prolific and under reasonable protection is capable not only of holding its own but of providing annually large supplies of meat and fur.

The fur of the opossum is not especially handsome or durable. As a result the prices paid for it have been low for many years, and at present opossum production on farms is not profitable. The animals require as much feed, equipment, and attention as some of the other fur species, and the pelt must be sold for much less.

Description.-- The opossum is one of the marsupials--a varied group of animals limited to North and South America and the Australian region. The young of marsupials are born in a relatively undeveloped condition and complete their development in an external pocket, or pouch, in the skin of the mother's abdomen, where they attach themselves to the teats. The Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), largest of all the American species, is about the size of a cat and has coarse hair; a piglike snout; naked ears; a long, hairless, prehensile tail; and long, slender, and widely spread toes. The footprints of opossums on the muddy border of a stream or in a dusty trail show every toe as distinctly as in a bird track, and they are unmistakably different from those of any other animal.

Distribution and habitat.-- In the United States the opossum is found in the wooded eastern parts from eastern New York, southern Wisconsin, and eastern Nebraska south to the Gulf coast, and its range extends farther south into the tropics. The opossum loves the vicinity of water and is most numerous in and about swamps or other wet lowlands and along bottomlands bordering streams. The dens are made in hollow trees, in holes under the roots of trees, or in similar openings.

^{1/} This leaflet supersedes Biological Survey Leaflet Bi-180, issued in April 1916 by the Bureau of Biological Survey, under the Department of Agriculture.

Breeding.-- In the extreme southern parts of the United States the breeding season of the opossum begins in January; in the North it is probably several weeks later. The prevailing weather seems to have no effect on the beginning of the breeding season. The opossum has more than one heat period, and a female may have two litters a year; in rare instances a vigorous individual has been known to have three.

Like the fox and other smaller fur animals, the opossum breeds during its first year. The usual period of gestation is about 11 days. The new-born young soon reach the pouch of the mother. There each one finds a teat and all remain attached to the teats for about two months without once relinquishing the hold. During the next 30 days the young move freely about the mother, clinging to her hair or holding to her tail with their own. They enter the pouch for food, and when startled they seek refuge there.

Pens and nest boxes.-- The following directions for housing and other care are furnished for the guidance of persons who wish to undertake experiments in raising opossums in captivity:

Pens 24 feet long, 12 feet wide, and 6 feet high are satisfactory for opossums. When there are no trees in the pen it is best that the sides and top be completely covered with woven-wire netting, 16-gage, 1 1/2-inch mesh. The wire may extend into the ground 6 inches, or an 18-inch wire carpet may be fastened to the side walls and ends to keep the animals from digging out. Instead of a complete covering for the top of the pen, an overhang of galvanized iron 2 feet wide around the top may be sufficient. Trees allowed to remain in the pens should be far enough away from the side walls to prevent the opossums from climbing over and escaping.

Dens with removable nest boxes are well adapted for opossums. These should be placed outside pens, for both pens and dens are thus more easily cleaned and kept sanitary. Various types of dens and pens have proved successful. Important points to keep in mind in constructing dens are the comfort of the animals and the ease with which the dens can be kept clean by the caretaker. Pens will remain clean much longer if constructed on ground that is covered with grass.

Male opossums should not be placed in pens together. The young, as soon as they are old enough to eat by themselves, should be taken away from the mother and placed in separate pens.

Feeding.-- Opossums eat a great variety of food, as meat, eggs, milk, fruit, bread, cooked vegetables, soft nuts, insects, crawfishes, and mice. On a farm the cost of feeding is low. In the wild state the animals usually fast while the ground is covered with snow. In feeding, cleanliness and regularity are important.

